

# Midrash and Parables

Emma Hull (She/Her)

To understand the role parables play in the Gospel of Matthew, we need to understand midrash. Midrash is rabbinic biblical interpretation that has its base in a canonical scripture, though it might go far beyond analyzing just the written text of said scripture (Porton, 1992, 4:819). It is generally recognized as starting in the late 1st century CE, but predecessors to midrashic interpretation can be found in the second temple period. (Burns, 2020, 2:499) As we can probably imagine, the deeper meanings rabbis found didn't always, or even often, match up, though since they were all interpreting the same source material there were similarities. In fact, some even call Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible midrash (Stern, 2011, 707). Though this is controversial, there are clear similarities between Jewish midrash and Christian biblical interpretation, especially in the Gospel of Matthew. (Stern, 2011, 707) One example of this can be found in fulfilment narratives. As we have read, there are many instances where Matthew will say that a certain event in Jesus's life fulfils scripture from the Hebrew bible. The scriptures that Matthew references are not always framed as prophetic in their original context, but Matthew interprets them as such and reads their fulfilment into the life of Jesus. In midrashic literature, there are similar interpretations, where a certain line of scripture will be fulfilled even though that line is not originally posed as prophetic (Stern, 2011, 707-708). Other examples of similarities include genealogies that justify the power of a certain person, like the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew, and contests in which a holy person will duel a heretical being using scripture, like Jesus's temptation, in which he rebukes each of the devil's statements with a line of scripture (Stern, 2011, 708).

Another similarity between Midrash and the Gospel of Matthew can be found in parables. Parables are fictional stories or statements that illustrate something about reality (Snodgrass, 2008, 23) and Jesus is well known for frequently speaking in parables. In the Hebrew Bible, the word "mashal" is usually translated as "parable," though this word has a wider definition (Stern, 2011, 708). Still, the Jewish mashalim and the Christian parables are often very similar in their themes, the subjects they use, and even their lesson, probably because they both draw from widely known oral teachings (Stern, 2011, 709).

One example of similar parables is the parable of the wicked tenants and a certain mashal on Deut. 32.9. The parable details how a man with a vineyard lends it out to tenants, but when it comes time to collect the grapes, the tenants beat and kill everyone the man sends, including his son. The man then gets rid of the tenants and gives the vineyard to other people. In this case, the wicked tenants are the Jewish authorities, and the parable is about how the Jewish authorities will be cast aside to be replaced by Christianity.

The mashal is about a king who has a field that he gives to tenants who “plunder the land,” so the king takes it away and gives it to their children, but the children are even worse, so he gives it to the grandchildren, but the grandchildren are the worst of all. When the king has a son, he kicks them all off of his property and reclaims it. In this case, the tenants are the “inferior” children of Abraham and Issac, and the “son” who will get the land are Jacob’s sons, the Israelites (Stern, 2011, 709-710).

These share basic story elements such as a focus on agriculture, the wicked tenants, and an heir to the land from the wicked tenants at the end of the story, but more telling are their similarities in meaning. Both pose one group as the rightful owner of something that the other has lost a right to and, as such, villainizes the groups represented by the wicked tenants. Though the groups the stories portray are different, the meanings are similar enough that it is clear that they are both from the same culture of analysis. The differences in their meanings are also important in that they also demonstrate the difference between Jewish midrash and Christian interpretation. Christian interpretation looks to glorify Jesus’s followers, while Jewish midrash looks to glorify Israel and explain their misfortunes as part of God’s plan for them (Stern, 2011, 708). Another difference is that while the parables in the Gospel often go unexplained, there is usually a paragraph explaining a mashal (Stern, 2011, 709-710). Matthew’s use of this familiar representation of Christian concepts might have made said concepts more appealing to Jewish audiences (Stern, 2011, 710).

#### Works Cited

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